

Gender Discrimination following Parental Leave

Helen Eriksson¹ and Filip Olsson^{2,3}

¹ Stockholm University Demography Unit (SUDA)

² Department of Sociology, Stockholm University

³ European University Institute

ABSTRACT

Gender inequality in the labour market continues to be strongly shaped by parenthood, with women's careers and earnings declining sharply after the birth of a child. Although men and women in Sweden express highly egalitarian attitudes, parental leave uptake remains gendered, and the mechanisms sustaining this imbalance are not fully understood. This study examines whether unequal treatment of men and women based on their parental leave choices—termed *leave-based gender discrimination*—helps explain persistent disparities. Using a nationwide vignette experiment conducted through Sweden's probability-based Novus panel, we randomly assigned 1,026 respondents to evaluate an employee (male/female) who had taken parental leave of varying lengths (none, two weeks, three months, twelve months, or fifteen months). Participants then recommended a salary increase for the employee. The factorial design allows us to isolate gendered evaluations of identical leave durations. Preliminary analyses show that women who take shorter-than-average leaves receive lower salary recommendations than men taking the same leave, suggesting that women are penalized for behaviour that deviates from gender norms of caregiving. Conversely, men who take long leaves are rated less favourably than comparable women, indicating a penalty for fathers who exceed normative expectations. Regression models confirm a significant negative association between leave length and salary recommendations for men but not for women. These findings demonstrate that both mothers and fathers are subject to gender-specific penalties for non-normative leave choices, highlighting how deeply entrenched norms of caregiving continue to shape workplace evaluations even in an egalitarian context.

BACKGROUND

Women's parental leave—and their disproportionate share of the family responsibilities that follow—has become one of the key factors for understanding gender inequality in the labour market. While childless women and men tend to follow similar career trajectories, the arrival of the first child triggers a sharp decline in women's income and significantly stalls their careers. Despite widespread recognition that parenthood is the primary factor dividing the working lives of women and men, it remains poorly understood why today's couples—many of whom hold highly egalitarian attitudes—revert to deeply unequal behaviours once they become parents.

Although a range of international studies have investigated what we here call leave-based gender discrimination, most of these studies are found in the Anglo-Saxon context. A handful of international survey experiments have estimated the difference in the assessment of

women and men of a family-related work absence of the same duration and found that fathers are discriminated for long absences in the United States (Rudman & Mescher 2013) and the United Kingdom (Butler & Skattebo 2004), while women are discriminated for short leaves in Germany (Hipp, 2018). In the Nordic context, leave-based gender discrimination is an often-cited speculative mechanism as to why fathers' wages are more negatively affected by parental leave than mothers (Albrecht et al. 1999, Evertsson 2016).

A recent survey experiment from the U.S. did however not show any gender penalty for shorter absences (three months full-time) (Petts, Mize & Kaufman 2022), but it is unclear how transferable the results of these studies are to the European context. In a U.S. context, the variation in parental leave duration is very large for women—where ten percent are absent for less than a month, and one-fifth resign to become housewives (Laughlin 2011)—while paternal leave is almost non-existent. For many American couples, the lack of leave policies and laws providing job security make equitable choices impossible in practice. Methodologically, it is also not clear how a longer care absence is interpreted by the respondents as it implies job loss and an unclear economic situation.

DATA AND METHODS

Experimental design

A between-subjects experimental design was employed, wherein each participant was exposed to a single employee profile and thus received only one set of experimental manipulations. Participants were randomly assigned to one of ten experimental conditions generated through a full factorial design crossing employee gender (male/female) with parental leave length (five levels, including a control condition in which leave was not mentioned). Following the profile, participants responded to the item assessing the outcome variable *salary increase recommendation*.

We recruited participants from an online panel administered by the private company Novus, which is recruited entirely through random sampling (i.e., self-selection into the survey is not possible). Novus provides the only exclusively probability-based web panel in Sweden and has been used in several peer-reviewed studies (e.g., Esaiasson & Sohlberg 2024). Although, like all survey-based research, Novus faces challenges related to declining response rates during panel recruitment, our respondents are likely to represent a considerably more diverse sample than those commonly found in panels such as Prolific and MTurk, which have been widely used in previous research on the topic (e.g. Petts et al. 2025).

After reading the employee description, respondents were asked to give their *salary increase recommendation*. As salary raises are regulated in collective agreements covering the majority of Swedish workplaces, we introduced to the respondents that the mandated yearly salary revision was coming up and asked whether they would recommend a salary increase or not. Yearly salary revisions—including salary talks with the individual employee—are regulated. Most collective agreements dictate that salaries are to be individualized and differentiated by performance (Swedish Agency for Government Employers 2025) and so most workers are familiar with performance-based salaries.

Gender was manipulated by altering the first names in the colleague description. *Emma* and *Marcus* were chosen as the most common male and female names of the cohort at the mean age of first birth in year 2025 (age 30), each with a similar number of occurrences (Statistics Sweden 2025).

Leave length was experimentally manipulated into four different categories—two weeks, three months, twelve months and fifteen months—along with a control condition in which no leave-taking was mentioned. The duration of three and twelve months correspond to recent estimates of the average parental leave taken by Swedish fathers and mothers, respectively (Duvander and Viklund 2020). In contrast, the reversed pairings—three months for women and twelve months for men—represent durations at the ends of the distribution for each gender (Duvander and Viklund 2020).

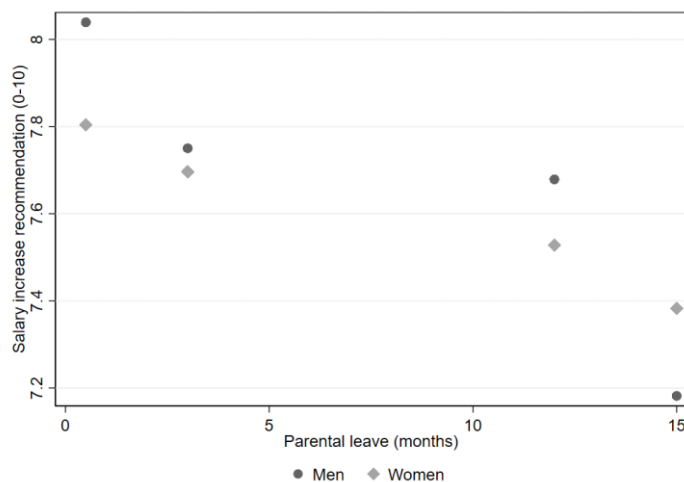
PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Our sample included 1,082 respondents. After removing 56 participants who failed the attention check, the final sample consisted of 1,026 respondents. These participants were randomly assigned across two genders (man/woman) and five parental leave lengths (no leave, two weeks, three months, 12 months, and 15 months).

Figure 1 shows the mean salary increase recommendations for men and women across the different parental leave lengths in the vignette experiment. First, women taking short parental leaves receive less favourable salary recommendations compared to men taking the same leave length. This aligns with our expectation that women are penalized when their leave is shorter than socially expected. Surprisingly, this pattern also appears for a 12-month leave—well beyond the typical leave length taken by fathers in Sweden. Further analyses of the mediating factors of warmth and competence may help explain this finding. Second, men taking the longest leave—15 months—receive lower salary recommendations than women taking the same amount of leave. This supports our expectation that men are penalized when taking leave longer than what is socially expected.

We tested these differences using a regression model with salary recommendation as the outcome and an interaction between vignette gender and parental leave length as the explanatory variables. The model showed that fathers receive significantly lower salary recommendations the longer their leave (-0.05 , $p = 0.001$). For mothers, differences across leave lengths were not statistically significant.

Figure 1. Salary recommendations for men and women across different lengths of parental leave.



REFERENCES

- Albrecht, J. W., Edin, P.-A., Sundström, M. & Vroman, S. B. (1999). Career interruptions and subsequent earnings: A reexamination using Swedish data. *The Journal of Human Resources*, 36(2), 294-311.
- Butler, A. B., & Skattebo, A. (2004). What is acceptable for women may not be for men: The effect of family conflicts with work on job-performance ratings. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 77(4), 553-564.
- Duvander, A. Z., & Viklund, I. (2020). How long is a parental leave and for whom? An analysis of methodological and policy dimensions of leave length and division in Sweden. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 40(5/6), 479-494.
- Esaiasson, P., & Sohlberg, J. (2025). Social order in Sweden's politicized and vulnerable neighborhoods—The perspective of residents. *European Journal of Political Research*, 64(2), 744-766.
- Evertsson, M. (2016). Parental leave and careers: Women's and men's wages after parental leave in Sweden. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 29, 26-40.
- Hipp, L. (2018). Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't? Experimental Evidence on Hiring Discrimination Against Parents with Differing Lengths of Family Leave. SocArXiv. August 27. doi:10.31235/osf.io/qsm4x.
- Laughlin, L. 2011. Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns of First-Time Mothers: 1961–2008. *Current Population Reports*. U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce.
- Petts, R. J., Kincaid, R., Mize, T. D., & Kaufman, G. (2025). Gone too long or back too soon? Perceptions of paid parental leave-taking and variations by gender and family structure. *Journal of Marriage and Family*.
- Petts, R. J., Mize, T. D., & Kaufman, G. (2022). Organizational policies, workplace culture, and perceived job commitment of mothers and fathers who take parental leave. *Social science research*, 103, 102651.
- Rudman, L. A., & Mescher, K. (2013). Penalizing men who request a family leave: Is flexibility stigma a femininity stigma? *Journal of Social Issues*, 69(2), 322-340.
- Statistics Sweden. (2022). Tilltalsnamn. Statistikdatabasen, Namnstatistiken, BE0001AN [Name statistics].
- Swedish Agency for Government Employers. (2025). Lönebildning [Wage formation]. <https://www.arbetsgivarverket.se/arbetsgivarguiden/lonebildning>.